A Study about the Relevance of Nicene Faith through the Trinitarian Interpretations of a few Ancient Eastern Christian Theologians

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The Nicene Creed is considered as one of the most significant expressions of the Apostolic faith in the ancient Church, developed in response to the Divine self-revelation in Christ. This summary statement of faith of the ancient church, formulated even before the compilation of the Bible in the form used today, is extremely noteworthy.

On the occasion of the 1700th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Council that met in Nicaea in 325 CE and the formulation of this creed, many seminars and discussions are being organized all over the world, to analyze and reflect on the significance of this small yet profound statement of faith.

This study is an attempt to arrive at the contextual significance of the creed, primarily through a reading of a few ancient eastern Christian Trinitarian interpreters of the Nicene faith. Since Patristic teachings are deeply embedded in the Biblical texts and liturgical understanding of the ancient Christian community, this study may be beneficial for current theologizing, anchored in the faith of the ancient Christian church.

'Nicaea', a name for the faith of the ancient Church and unity of the churches

Constantine, the emperor who gave freedom for the Church in the beginning of the fourth century after its persecution for three centuries, convened the first ecumenical meeting of the Church in Nicaea (Today Iznik in Turkey) to sort out the divisive tendencies prevailing in the Christian community, at that time. More than three hundred bishops from different parts of the world, primarily from the Roman Empire, along with many priests and deacons who accompanied them, attended this synod held at Nicaea near Constantinople. In addition to the finalization of a statement of faith, this Council also pronounced a few anathemas and took a few important decisions which included that of the time of the celebration of Easter. 'We believe in the Holy Spirit also' was the only reference to the Holy Spirit in the creed formulated at Nicaea.

The Creed was completed at the second ecumenical synod held at Constantinople in 381. It was here that the description about the Holy Spirit was added in the third paragraph. So, the Nicene Creed is actually a Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and Nicaea is a short name of this creed as a whole and for the faith upheld through this. Since the Nicene creed is an ecumenical affirmation of the faith of the ancient Church accomplished through the first two ecumenical synods and since it is upheld by the majority of the Churches across the world even today, Nicaea stands for the unity of the Churches also.

Trinitarian Faith prior to Nicaean Council

The mystery of the Holy Trinity was unveiled in and through Jesus Christ and slowly, His followers realized the importance of this vision. Specifically, the baptism of Jesus Christ is the occasion when the Trinity manifested itself in a unique way and it is in this relation that the

feast which celebrates this in the ancient Syrian Christian Tradition is called *Denaha,* which literally means 'rising up'. As the Sun rises in the morning clearing away darkness, the vision of the Trinity, unveiled in a unique way during the time of Jesus' baptism, dispels the darkness of ignorance about the transcendent source of life. Reference to baptism and benediction in the name of the 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' can be seen in the New Testament (for example, Matthew 28:19 & II Corinthians 13:14) as well as in the liturgical texts of the ancient Church. Seeds of the Trinitarian theology can be seen in many other parts of the Bible also. For example, in His farewell speech Jesus says, "*when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me*" (John 15:26) and Peter in his Pentecostal speech says, "This Jesus God has raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." Acts 2: 32, 33).

Ancient Christian fathers like Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, Origen etc have written about the Holy Trinity which prepared a good ground for the Nicene faith. The teaching of Origen who lived in the third century had greatly influenced the discussions at the Nicaean Council and also the formulation of the Creed in the fourth century. Ilaria Ramelli by highlighting the coeternity and equality of the divine essence of the Father and the Son according to Origen, argues that one theologian who had tremendous impact on the theological discussions of Nicaea was none other than Origen.[1] For Origen the unity between Father and the Son is a sharing of both essence and will.[2] Coeternity of the Logos with the Father was an important thought in Origen's theology. He defended the dogmatic formula "there was no time when Christ did not exist."[3] It must be noted that one of the anathemas of Nicaean Council was against those who profess "there was a time when he (the Son of God) was not".

Nicene creed was not an innovative introduction of a new faith but an amplified and more clear expression of a faith which was integral to the Holy tradition of the Church starting from the Apostles.

Strange teachings which tried to nullify Trinity

Two kinds of strange teachings by some Christian leaders aiming to simplify Trinity and to uphold monotheism emerged in the third and fourth centuries. One type tried to uphold the unity of Godhead by negating the distinction of three persons of the Holy Trinity and the second kind tried to make the Son or the Holy Spirit, or both, just created beings not being co-eternal or coessential with the Father. Modalism or Sabellianism is an example of the first type. Adoptionism and Arianism and also Macedonianism are examples of the second category, of which Arianism was the immediate cause of the Nicaean Council.

Arius was a priest of North Africa who had studied in Antioch under the influential theologian Lucian of Antioch, who used to glorify the humanity of Jesus Christ and tried to explain the incarnation of God in Christ without making Jesus himself equal to God. Arius and his colleague Eusebius of Nicomedia, were influenced very much by Lucian. It was this Eusebius who served as a spokesperson of Arianism at the Nicaean Council. The Greek thought, that God is beyond change, is a very powerful idea behind Arianism. If the Son of God is divine like the Father, it was impossible for him to become man according to this view, because that process would cause tremendous change. So, for Arius, the Logos who became incarnate in Jesus Christ must not be fully divine. In his 'Profession of Faith' written in 320 Arius wrote:

"This one God, before all time, begot his only- begotten Son, through whom he made the ages and the universe. He begot him not just in appearance, but in fact; by his own will he made his son to subsist and he made him unchangeable and unalterable. God's perfect creature, he is unlike any other creature; begotten, yes, but unique in the manner of his begetting: ….. But we say that he was created by God's will, before all ages."[4] So Arius places Son in an exalted position but still he is a creature only. Roger E. Olson rightly says "Arius and his colleagues-the Arians – affirmed a kind of Trinity made up of three 'divine' beings (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), only one of whom is truly God. He continued to affirm unequivocally in his 'profession of faith,' that only the Father is without beginning and that the Son, though a great creature who shares many of God's attributes, did not exist before he was begotten by the Father."[5]. He strongly believed that God is uncreated and since Logos became a human being, he cannot be God and there was a time when he was not. In other words, according to Arius, the Logos or Son was not coeternal and coessential with the Father. For Arius and his followers, salvation meant, to do the will of God freely by following Christ's example and teachings.

Arius' Bishop Alexander of Alexandria responded to this strange teaching in a gentle manner and he sent correcting letters and gave warnings to change Arius. But when Arius continued his teachings and even accused the Bishop of unacceptable teaching, this bishop informed his fellow bishops about this heretical teaching and tried to counter it through various ways. It was an attempt to safeguard the Gospel as we know and believe. Athanasius as a deacon under this bishop and later as bishop himself defended the traditional faith of the Church. The Emperor Constantine also became sensitive to this controversy brewing in his Empire. The Emperor longed to see Christianity as a strong glue to hold his shaky empire together. So he took initiative to convene a synod of all bishops of his empire to settle this doctrinal dispute and to decide what Christians must believe to be counted as true Christins. Thus, the Nicaean council occurred in 325.

The Holy Trinity in the Creed

There are three distinctive persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in the Trinity, who are of the same divine essence, according to the Creed. The expression "one God" at the beginning of the Creed indicates unity which avoids any notion of tritheism. Nicaean bishops deliberately inserted the Greek word *homoousios* (same substance or the same essence) to affirm that the Son is of the same substance with the father or the son is also equal to the Father in divinity. 'Lord' is used in the Creed twice -once to represent Christ and secondly to denote the Holy Spirit. It must be noted that when the Hebrew Bible was translated to Greek (Septuagint) *Kurios* (Lord) was used to indicate Yahweh. So, by calling the Son and the Holy Spirit 'Lord', the Creed affirms that both the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal to the Father in divinity. The expression "true God of true God; begotten not made" used in the Creed to describe the Son, refutes the Arian teaching about the created nature of Son and indicates the equality of the Son with the Father concerning divinity. The expression "who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified" included in the Creed, also clarifies the distinction of the three persons of the Trinity as well as the incredible unity of the Trinity.

Early Eastern Interpretations of the Nicene Faith

Even after the Nicene Council and the formation of the Creed, Arianism continued to influence people. It was in this context that many enlightened saintly leaders of the Church felt the need

to defend the Nicene faith by giving further holistic interpretation of the Holy Trinity. The prominent Eastern fathers who developed such a Trinitarian interpretation to defend Nicene faith in the fourth century which is known as the golden era of patrology, are Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom and Ephrem. A few salient features of their such teachings are:

I. Teaching about the Unity in Trinity

Faith of the Israel in One God enshrined in the Shema, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4) is fundamental to the heritage of Christian faith also. Jaroslav Pelikan calls it "a monument and fiery pillar of the primal creed and confession of the Christian Church."[6] Ancient Christian writers have taken extra care to ensure that the Trinitarian vision of God is not polytheism. How did the eastern Christian teachers of the fourth century describe the Trinitarian faith as monotheistic? Gregory Nazianzen depicts this unity in the Trinity in minimum words thus, "for us the monarchy is formed by equality of nature, harmony of will, and identity of activity, and the occurrence with the One of the Beings which derive from the One, a unity impossible among creaturely beings, so that while they are numerically distinct there is no severance in substance(*ousia*)."[7] This description in nutshell needs to be elaborated.

1. *Homoousia* or the same essence

These teachers have used the *homoousia* argument in their interpretations of the Nicene faith in different ways to show that Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are identical in nature or essence. Athanasius and other fathers of fourth century have argued brilliantly that the salvation and Divine revelation available in Christ is valid and perfect because He also is God.[8] Countering the Arian thought, Athanasius thinks that if the argument that 'there was a time when the Son was not' is true, then the very identity of the Father himself will be in peril.[9] He goes on to portray the coequality of Father and Son by explaining the eternal generation of the Son from the Father.

Cappadocians distinguish the uncreated nature of all three persons of the Trinity and the createdness of the Creation. Thus, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the same nature or essence which is different from the essence or nature of anything created. Gregorios of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa explain the same uncreated nature of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nyssa writes, "Uncreatedness is a property Father holds in common with the Son and the Holy Spirit ….. The Son is linked to the Father and the Holy Spirit in his uncreatedness …. The Holy Spirit is joined to the Father and the Son by the common property of uncreatedness….."[10] Gregory Nazianzen has also beautifully explained the coeternity and thus coessentiality of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.[11]

Gregory of Nyssa says that though the basic substance of different gold coins is the same gold, they are described as many gold coins. Similarly, though there is the same human nature in Peter James and John, the plural term 'men' can be applied to them. "But Scripture ….is careful to use the word 'God' in the singular only, to guard against introducing the notion of different natures in the divine essence."[12] Cappadocians use *ousia* to indicate that which is common and hypostasis to that which is particular. Against Eunomius who tried to propagate Arianism they strongly taught about "the three *hypostases* in one *ousia*" (three persons in one nature). They taught that the adjectives 'unbegotten', 'begotten' and 'proceeded' can be used respectively to indicate the distinctive existence of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit but not to indicate

difference of natures. Gregory of Nyssa clearly says, “in speaking about ‘cause’ and ‘caused’ we do not mean to indicate a difference of nature, but only a difference in manner of existence.”[13] So while appreciating distinction and plurality in Godhead, they unceasingly affirm the fact that there is no difference of nature between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

2. Same operation and perichoresis

Ancient Christian Greek fathers have also explained the essential unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit on the basis of the unity of operation. Though one person is highlighted at one time, acts of creation, incarnation, salvation etc. are done together by all three persons. It is true that where there is only one action, there is only one agent. If the action proceeds from three members of the Trinity, then the Trinity is the single source of that action. Though each person is a willing agent in the Trinity, each divine act is a single activity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nyssa, while describing the singularity of the activity of the Triune God writes thus " .the operation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is one, differing or varying in nothing, the oneness of their nature must be inferred from the identity of their operation."[14]. On another occasion Gregory of Nyssa explains it thus, “We are not told that the Father does anything by himself in which the Son does not cooperate; or that the Son has any isolated activity apart from the Holy Spirit. All activities which extend from God to creation are described by different names, in accordance with the different ways in which they are presented to our thought.: but every such activity originates from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is brought to fulfillment in the Holy Spirit. For this reason the name of the activity is not split among the plurality of the agents….. Whatever happens, whether it concerns his providence for us, or the government and ordering of the whole universe, takes place through the action of the three; but what happens is not three things.”[15]

Though there are three distinctive persons (*hypostasis*) in the Godhead, according to the ancient interpreters of the Nicaean faith, all the works of the Triune God can be understood as a same operation. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have the same will and the same operation. By "energy" (*energia*) of the Trinity, ancient Christian fathers meant the perceivable manifestation of God through operation in history. As there is one nature there is one 'energy' in the Trinity. In other words, there is one and the same operation for the Trinity which communicates the Trinitarian life of God based on love for His creation.

The Greek word *perichoresis* means to 'make room for' or 'to come round to in succession'. It indicates reciprocity. Greek fathers used this term to explain the internal co-inherence and mutual indwelling of the three persons in the Trinity. On one occasion, we experience the Son at the forefront and on another occasion the Holy Spirit. When the Son is highlighted, the Father and the Spirit are also with Him. In the next phase when the Holy Spirit plays an active role and is at the forefront of the operations, the other two persons of the Trinity are also with the Spirit. This is ‘mutual indwelling’ or ‘*perichoresis’*.

In order to explain this insight of the same operation and perichoresis to modern minds, an analogy of brain, nerve and an organ of a body can be used. For example, during a handshake, while one hand of a person is extended to the other person, along with it, the nerve and brains are also working to make it happen. Since the nerve and brains are working along with the hand, without being seen, though the act appears to be that of the hand only, actually it is a

combined act of the three. Likewise, the Holy Spirit and the Father were also with the incarnate Son.

3. The Father as the Principle of Unity

Cappadocian fathers think of the Father as the source from whom the other two persons - The Son and the Holy Spirit - derive their being. "God is one," writes St. Basil, "because the Father is one." Gregory Nazianzen portrays Father as the principle of unity thus, “They (Son and Holy Spirit) derive from the First Being, though they are not after him. ‘Without beginning’ implies ‘eternal’. Yes; but eternal does not necessarily imply ‘without beginning’ seeing that these Beings are referred to the Father as their origin. Thus, they are not without beginning in respect of cause. But it is clear that a cause is not necessarily prior in time to its effects; for the sun is not prior to the sunlight…”[16] Bishop Kallistos Ware describes the same idea in these words: "The first person of the Trinity, God the Father, is the foundation of Godhead, the source, cause or principle of origin for the other two persons. He is the bond of unity between the three: there is one God because there is one Father."[17] It must also be noted that God the Father is the eternal source of the eternal Son and the eternal Holy Spirit. There is no time and space between them.

In the third paragraph of the Nicene Creed, the faith is 'in the one living Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father…". This is based on the biblical depiction of the Spirit as ‘proceeding’ from Father (Jn15:26). So the attempt to insert the expression "and from the Son" (filioque) in this part of the creed was not acceptable for the Orthodox. The Orthodox think that the double procession or the procession from the Father and the Son presupposes two sources in the Trinity. They fear that two sources (‘filioque’) would damage the principle of unity in the Trinity.

In an insightful study on the Father, based on the teachings of the ancient Christian fathers, the Orthodox theologian John Behr opines that they understood God as the Father or for them Father is a synonym for God above all. But the Son and the Holy Spirit are together with the Father and the Father is revealed through the Son and the Spirit. John Behr writes , “When Gregory of Nyssa speaks of certain continuous and uninterrupted communion that appears in them (Father, Son and the Holy Spirit), he is referring directly to the invariability of nature contemplated equally in each, the continuity of the being of the Father in the Son and the Spirit – not a “communion” or “community” between the persons, as the analogy of three distinct human agents might suggest, and as is the case for the perichoretic unity of the three spoken about much in modern Trinitarian theology.”[18] He summarises his argument thus, “The One ‘God over all’ is thus the Father, made known through the Son and the Spirit, with whom he eternally exists and without whom he is never contemplated.”[19]

4. Mutual glory and delight as Intra-Trinitarian Communion

Athanasius, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa give a clear picture about interpersonal communion in the Holy Trinity in the transcendent realm also. They come to this conclusion based on the experience from the historical realm as depicted in the Gospels and some other Biblical passages. Athanasius’ initiative to apply the declaration of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:30, “I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always” to the pre-existent Christ is insightful.[20] Summarizing Athanasius’ profound Biblical Trinitarian theology in this regard, Khaled Anatolios says “If communion with creation can be a delight for God, then surely we have to

conceive of that delight as merely an extension outward of the intra divine interpersonal delight of the Holy Trinity."[21]

Focusing on verses which teach how the Holy Spirit glorifies the Son (for ex. John 16:13-14) and how the Son will be glorified by the Father and the Father by the Son (John 12.28), Basil describes mutual intra trinitarian glorification and communion in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*. Gregory of Nyssa elaborates this vision of his brother and depicts the Trinity as a "circle of glory" thus, "….Now the Spirit does glorify the Father and the Son. And he is not a liar who said, 'I glorify those that glorify me.' 'I have glorified you,' says the Lord to the Father, and again he says, 'glorify me with the glory which I had with you before the world was.' The divine voice responds, 'I have both glorified and will glorify again.' You see the circle of glory revolving among those who share a likeness. The Son is glorified by the Spirit; the Father is glorified by the Son; again, the Son has his glory from the Father; and the only -begotten thus becomes the glory of the Spirit."[22] This portrayal of Trinitarian life as a circle of mutual glorification and interpersonal communion is insightful. This is helpful not to confine the unity of the Holy Trinity to an expression 'one essence' or 'communion of nature'.

I. About Distinctions within the Godhead

The three persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit exist eternally as three distinct persons having the same nature and deep communion. Though they are a community having co-eternity and co-equality, as Gregory Nazianzen says, the names the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as we see in the Bible, indicate distinction of persons in the Trinity: ingeneracy / unbegottenness is a special aspect of the Father, generation or begottenness is special to the Son and procession particular to the Holy Spirit. "The very facts of not being begotten, of being begotten and of proceeding, give them whatever names are applied to them – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, respectively. The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases within the single nature and quality of the Godhead. The Son is not Father; there is one Father, yet he is whatever the Father is. The Spirit is not Son because he is from God; there is one Only-begotten. Yet whatever the Son is, he is. The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in personalities. Thus, there will be no Sabellian 'One', no three to be mischievously divided by our contemporaries."[23] Gregory Nazianzen's line of thought is that since these names and titles of the three persons of the Trinity, as we get from the revelation recorded in the New Testament, refer to the distinction of the persons, these are not interchangeable. But there is no separation between them in time, will or in power as in human beings. Likewise Gregory of Nyssa also writes about the distinctive nature of the persons of the Trinity in details and concludes with these words, "the persons of the Godhead are not divided from each other in time, place, will, occupation, activity or any qualifications of this sort, the distinguishing marks observed in human beings. The only distinction here is that the Father is Father, not Son; the Son is Son, not Father; similarly, the Holy Spirit is neither Father nor Son."[24] Father, Son and the Holy Spirit do not differ in essence or nature (ousia) but in their personal attributes (hypostasis) only. Paternity (Father), filiation (Son) and procession (Holy Spirit) are such attributes according to these interpreters of the Nicene faith.

Patristic understanding is that "each of them enjoys a personal will within the unity of divine being and person."[25] It is noteworthy that Cappadocians characterise the Trinitarian persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as willing and acting agents. For them the unity of operations in Trinity is not an undifferentiated unity but a unity of the tripersonal distinctions.[26]

While describing the dignity of the hypostatic existence of the Holy Spirit, Gregory of Nyssa says, "Like God's Word, it exists hypostatically, is capable of willing, self-moved and active. It always chooses the good and it has the power that corresponds to its will in fulfilling every good purpose."[27] Without such an explanation, the description about the unity of being, will and operation of the persons of the Trinity may be misunderstood as one closer to modalism. So, what is seen in these interpretations is a uniquely unified differentiation and a differentiated unity.

II. A response to the issue of gender discrimination concerning the Trinity

Feminist theologians have raised the issue of gender discrimination with regard to the Trinitarian language. The criticism about the male chauvinist language of the Trinitarian theology in the book *Beyond God the Father* by Mary Daly can not be ignored. A rereading of Ephrem's interpretation of the Nicene faith will be beneficial in this regard. It is noticeable that books like *Nicaea and Its Legacy* present Ephrem as an exponent of Trinitarian Theology in the fourth century. Ephrem while explaining Trinity through interrelated symbols of Sun, light and warmth, deliberately links the Holy Spirit to warmth. He has described the life giving and divinising work of the Holy Spirit by using the image of **a** hen giving warmth to egg while brooding over it. He extends this feminine language to explain further when he explains the generation of the Son from the hidden womb of the Father. In *On Virginity* he writes,

"Christ, You have given life to the creation by Your birth
that took place openly from a womb of flesh
Christ, You dazzled understanding by Your birth
that shone forth from eternity from the hidden womb." [28]

Kathleen McVey's comment about Ephrem's reference to divine birth of the Son in eternity in various hymns is worth mentioning, "Although Ephrem does not call God Mother, he seems also to avoid the name Father when he is speaking of the hidden womb and hidden birth in eternity; instead he refers to the Deity / Divinity or 'the Parent', 'the Great One' or 'the Great Being'."[29] Kathleen McVey also mentions that in one exception to this pattern when Ephrem does choose to couple the name of Father with the womb, he also selects the title Word (*Melta,* which is feminine in Syriac) to refer to the Son and develops the image using feminine verb forms. That particular passage is:

"The Word (Melta) of the Father came from His womb
and clothed herself in a body in another womb
She went forth from womb to womb
Filled by Her are chaste wombs
Blessed is the One Who dwells in us"[30]

Thus, Ephrem seems to mix deliberately the gendered language in his hymns concerning different persons of the Trinity and the Trinity in general to show that God incorporates and transcends gender categories.

Relevance of the Creed Today, A Trinitarian Approach

1. Victory over Biblical literalism

Nicene faith seen in the Creed as well as in the interpretations of the fourth century theologians show that these are faithful to a holistic understanding of the Bible especially the New Testament. The list of the books of the New Testament was not complete at the time of the Nicaean council. Though Nicene faith was in the mind of the Church in the first three centuries, it was articulated crisply when the Church faced a challenge through narrow interpretations of a few Biblical passages from here and there. For example, the Arian argument highlights 'therefore' in the verse "Therefore, God has highly exalted him" (Philippians 2:9) to teach that Christ's exaltation was only a reward for his obedience to his Father and if his exaltation was not by nature, he cannot be God. They use the same logic in the exegesis of the sayings of Jesus like "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). Thus, they were trying to prove that Jesus is ontologically inferior to the Father. But the Nicene interpreters seem to explain such passages in the light of a broader and holistic Biblical perspective of which incarnation is a key theme. For example, Gregory Nazianzen says that it is the fact that the Son of God became a man that makes it possible for Jesus to say such a thing. Athanasius also observes that through incarnation it was possible for the Word to do things that he was not doing before the incarnation. Athanasius says "the incorporeal Word made his own the properties of the body."[31] Jesus' close associates were slowly realizing His divinity and they have poured light to interpret Christ's incarnation. David Maxwell's thesis that the incarnation serves as a key for the Nicene theologians to interpret the Scripture seem to be right: "For the Nicenes, the incarnation serves as the hermeneutical key that explains how the Son, who is above all such humiliating experiences, nevertheless undergoes them for our sakes. The Nicene Creed encapsulates this way of telling the story by emphasizing first that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father and then moving to the incarnation … That plotline is critical for interpreting all the passages in which Jesus undergoes humiliating experiences."[32] If this key of the Gospel – a God who suffers in Christ for the salvation or humanization of the world- is missing it will be difficult to understand the Gospel. Biblical literalism is an alienation from this center point.

The Holy Tradition of the Church as expressed through the Bible, liturgy and Creed give due importance to this holistic vision. Charles Jackson's observation in his study about the Nicene Creed affirms this holistic vision: "The authors of the creed did not believe they were expressing the collected thoughts of isolated individuals. No, they truly believed that the Creed expressed quite literally the God-breathed faith of the Scriptures as given to the church."[33]

2. A Call to build a Community of Love

Practical Implications derived from the ancient Trinitarian understanding of the Nicene faith are oriented towards building a community of love. This is visible in the teachings of modern theologians like John Zizioulas, Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, Dumitru Staniloae, Jurgen Moltman, Leonardo Boff etc. A few practical implications based on the Trinitarian theology which have the potential for building a community of love, justice and peace are:

a. The vision of the Trinity gives an affirmation of the beauty of diversity. The ultimate reality is not an eternal monad that disregards differentiation. Diversity has an eternal significance. Diversity is not a threat but the joy and beauty of God as well as His creation. But the underlying unity keeps this from not falling to conflicts and violence. The initiative today in a country like India of diverse cultures and religions, to go ahead with the forceful imposition of a Universal Civil Code (UCC), may appear to be good

in the view of those who struggle for uniformity. But it actually violates this basic principle of the dignity of difference.

John Philip's efforts to develop a Christian theology of plurality based on the Trinitarian teachings of Gregory of Nyssa is noticeable. Narrow understanding of monotheism may bring about in its followers an indifference or animosity to the followers of other religious traditions and lessons of history confirm it as true. He says, "In the rigid monotheism, pluralism is seen as an imperfection to be overcome because God is one and the same. It assumes that the monotheistic God wants only one tradition to be practised by all humans. This results in exclusive claims. In this context, the trinitarian theology is helpful to formulate a Christian theology of pluralism."[34] Following Gregory of Nyssa's trinitarian interpretation of Nicene faith, he argues that a proper Trinitarian understanding of God gives space for balancing plurality and harmony. How is it possible to transcend Christomonism without compromising faithfulness to Jesus Christ? He recommends the doctrine of Trinity as a solution: "The doctrine of Trinity proclaims that while God has been defined in Jesus, God has not been confined to Jesus. God remains, even after his self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, beyond Jesus. Jesus the Man is uniquely the Son of God, but God stands beyond Jesus. God, not Jesus Christ, is at the centre. The doctrine of the Trinity is above Christomonism."[35]

b. Perfect sharing, zero self-seeking and wholehearted commitment to the common good seen in the Trinity is the ultimate model for fellowship and community. The ultimate Being in communion motivates and inspires to reflect and radiate this truth in human dealings. Life on our planet with diverse cultures, religions, languages, nations etc. needs to be a reflection of this supreme model of community. It must be noted that Geevarghese Mar Osthathios who explains such a practical application of the Trinitarian vision highlights agape love as the essence of God.[36] His *Sharing God Sharing World* is a call to emulate this sharing and perfect fellowship of the Triune God so that our world could become a community of love, justice and peace. This vision of the ultimate ground of life is a healing light for the illness of communalism, fascism, casteism and all kinds of discrimination and fanaticism.

c. Even if the whole world does not know the perfect unity and fellowship of the Trinity, the Church which claims to know and worship this Triune community must become an ideal community after the model of the Holy Trinity. The vocation of the churches is to radiate the glory of this eternal communion. Worshippers are expected to become what they worship. It is noticeable that in the Orthodox liturgy of the Byzantine Orthodox Tradition, the chanting of the Nicene Creed is introduced with the formula: "Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess Father, Son , and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in essence and undivided."[37] Bishop Kallistos Ware's commentary on this portion of the Orthodox Liturgy gives clear exhortation that love and fellowship in the Church is **a** pre-requirement for reciting Creed and worshipping God: "The Creed belongs only to those who live it. This exactly expresses the Orthodox attitude to Tradition. If we do not love one another, we cannot love God; and if we do not love God, we cannot make a true confession of faith and cannot enter into the inner spirit of Tradition, for there is no other way of knowing God than to love him."[38]

d. The Holy Trinity is not an introverted or self-centred community. The Holy Trinity is coming out to give shape to a world outside and also to give abundant life to it. It is not possible to know the essence of God but it is possible to know Him through His activities. Actions of

creation, sustenance of it, giving fullness of life to it etc. are expressions of the Triune God's self-communication and self-offering. God is a sending God. Jesus revealed that He was sent by the Father to this world and Jesus promised that he will send the Holy Spirit from the Father (John 15: 26; 16: 5, 7). He goes on to say that as the Father sent Him, He sends his followers. So, all communities including families and parishes within the global community are obligated to overcome the temptation to be a self-centred and closed community.

The Creed says about Jesus Christ who is the utmost example for an 'other-oriented existence': "for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and became man." Those who love him and worship Him must also serve with such a humility and self-sacrifice.

e. From the Triune God, we learn that personhood is to be defined in relationship and communion. Each person in the Ultimate Truth is not enjoying personal individuality in isolation but in perfect communion and relationship with each other. This is like quantum mechanics which is famous for its uncertainty principle. In the subatomic level electron or proton or neutron cannot be studied by isolating it from its relationship with others. Zizoulas develops his definition of being as relational based on the relationship of the divine persons in the Trinity. For him "*to be and to be in relation* becomes identical"[39] In the light of this profound truth, the tendency to think of tribal life as uncivilized and postmodern life with extreme individualism and self-centeredness as civilized, is to be re-examined.

The prominent and widespread consumerist culture today promotes unbridled individualism and self-seeking. The very first expression of the Creed, "we believe..." itself is an antidote to individualism. As Charles Jackson rightly observes "The Nicene formula helps us to appreciate that Christianity in its most basic form attacks individualism like antibodies attack germs in the body." [40]

3. Incomprehensibility of God and worship

Even if the Nicene theologians of the fourth century explain Trinity, they are in a consensus to admit that God in his essence is beyond our grasp. Intra-Trinitarian relationship is also beyond our comprehension. This is an indirect way of admitting the fact that the human faculty of knowing/comprehending is limited and that God is a mystery. John Chrysostom of fourth century comments about the incomprehensibility of the Trinity thus, "I know that He is eternal and has no beginning. But I do not know how. My reason fails to grasp how it is possible for a substance to exist when that substance has received its existence neither from itself nor from another. I know that He begot a Son. But I do not know how. I know that the Spirit is from him. But I do not know how the Spirit is from him."[41] Basil unequivocally says in one of his letters, "God's operations come down to us, but his essence remains beyond our reach."[42] Though theologizing is possible to some extent based on God's self-revelation, this insight about the incomprehensibility of the ultimate reality leads to apophatic theology, freedom from the tendency to absolutize one particular tradition or community or theological claim which is essential for openness to other communities, and also to worship which facilitates a transforming experience of the Trinity, the ultimate mystery. "Basil's treatise *On the Holy Spirit* clearly underscores the fact that for Basil the mystery of the Trinitarian Godhead was fundamentally a focus of praise and worship and not just speculative rationalizations divorced from the life of the Church…."[43]

Reciting the Creed itself is also a liturgical act, an act of adoration and worship in the Orthodox tradition. In addition to the meaning of *doxa* as opinion or doctrine, it has another meaning related to praise. So, Orthodoxy is right worship also. Jaroslav Pelikan says, "quite early on, *doxa* acquired the more specific meaning of laudatory opinion about someone, therefore of 'praise' …… From that meaning of doxa, 'orthodoxy' was construed to mean the correct way of giving glory."[44]. Perhaps as a continuation of this, it is also possible to say that giving glory to the Triune God is the correct way than trying to understand the mystery of God fully. Jaroslav Pelikan goes on to say that "Creed is not in the first instance the business of the professional and learned theological elite; *it is meant to be prayed*, right alongside the Lord's Prayer, as an act of adoration and worship …"[45]

Conclusion

Nicene creed which is the gist of the basic faith of the ancient Church is a reminder to own this faith as an anchor of life for those who try to follow the Lord. This is not just to be a ritualistic articulation of a few statements of faith but a powerful declaration of whole hearted trust in God by those who are dedicated to the Gospel. Faithfulness to this ancient faith need not be counted as just fanaticism today. The fact that it was in the presence of the mighty Emperor Constantine that the early Christian leaders formulated this creed which proclaims that their ultimate trust is not in power or other semi gods like money , luxury or anything else but in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is noteworthy. The consensus regarding the Trinitarian explanations among the early interpreters of the Nicene faith is incredible. Their ultimate concern was not just a victory over their opponents but the victory of the Gospel and the confirmation of the saving and divinizing intervention of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Thus we received a full fledged description of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity which can be appreciated as a qualified monotheism. Those interpreters' unceasing contemplation on and devotion to God the Father along with the Son and the Holy Spirit was not based on their baseless speculations and philosophizing but deeply based on their thorough Biblical, liturgical and patristic readings and reflections and a holistic understanding of the Divine interventions in History. From this they move to the reflection about the immanent Trinity focusing on the interpersonal relationship of the three persons in the Trinity in eternity which unveils to a certain extent the amazing love and fellowship in the Ultimate Source of life. This Holy Trinity is not only imparting a beautiful vision of diversity in unity and unity in diversity to be emulated by mankind but also an empowering grace to fulfill this vision. The Reference to baptism and also the apostolic identity of the Church in the Nicene Creed continuously reminds the baptized community to take up this calling to build a community of love, justice and peace with dedication and responsibility. As St. James mentions even Satan has a creed (James 2:19). But it is the genuine commitment to holiness, peace making, welfare of all, ecojustice, eradication of all dehumanizing elements and humanization of society, generating authentic faith in others and promotion of ecumenism, reflecting the agape love of the Holy Trinity that will manifest the different nature of the Nicene creed and Christians' sincerity to uphold this faith of the undivided ancient Church today.

Glory be to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever . Amen

End Notes

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